Prologue

In the watching woods of Danselana, north of the blue mountains, is a town called Wishfern. It's a cluster of buildings inhabited by about thirty humans, built onto and into a towering, many eyed watching birch hundreds of meters high. The people who live here forage the birch forests and make their own clothes, tools and homes. Just as their fathers did, and their grandfathers, and their father's grandfathers, as far back as records reach.

Hector lives here, and today he woke in the house his ancestors built many seasons ago, now only Hector and his father, Patrick live here. Hector has pale yellow skin, unkempt black hair and is not tall, short, fat or lean. Today he dressed in clothes dyed orange-yellow and stepped outside. The weather was chilly at the first signs of autumn, and the leaves on Wishfern's canopy had faded to yellow, tinting the sunlight that reached the town. He picked a wooden bucket off the porch and set off down the tree's limb toward the town center. He reached the well and Wudnak, the carpenter was already there. 'You've come second again.' said Wudnak. 'You just got lucky,' retaliated Hector, 'and if I lived as close to the well as you do I'd beat you every time!' 'You say that everyday.' said Wudnak, smiling to himself, he had already filled his bucket but stayed to talk. Hector lowered his bucket down into the well, through the tree trunk and into the ground before reaching water. 'Where are you hunting today?' asked Wudnak 'North somewhere. What are you carving today?' 'I'm not carving anything, I'm building new casks for Boska. Good luck finding any Felmorn, they've started to migrate to the interior.' 'We'll see,' Hector pulled the filled bucket up the well. 'See you later then.' he said, 'May the Light brighten your path.' replied Wudnak.

Hector walked back up the limb to his house, set the bucket on the porch and stepped inside. Patrick had awoken and was making breakfast in a small iron oven over the firestove. Hector pulled a chair away from the table and sat down, Patrick took the small oven off the fire and placed it on the table, then he used some wooden tongs to open the oven's lid. Inside was a small deep egg pie, colored red by the addition of peppers and topped with a sprinkling of cheese. Patrick cut himself a half, which he placed on his plate, and Hector followed suit. 'Heading north today I presume?' asked Patrick, 'yes,' said Hector, 'this egg pie is delicious.' Patrick nodded in appreciation and continued, 'It would be wise to take some line and do some fishing in the Piccant in case you don't catch any Felmorn ' 'Not a bad idea, I will' They finished the pie then Hector grabbed his satchel, which he added line and hooks to, a bow and a quiver then he stepped outside. At the edge of the limb a rope ladder was mounted, he went to it and cautiously started down. The ladder was tall and swayed in the wind, but Hector climbed down the ladder with a confidence gained only by years of experience. He reached the ground and pulled a wrist compass from his bag which he wore. He turned the wooden case around the needle until the orange arrow painted on it aligned northward. Then he set off through the woods.

Wudnak was right, Hector walked until he reached the yellow stained Piccant River but didn't see even a glimpse of the tall legs of felmorn. He took the line and fished in the river, eating some dried jerky from his satchel. Now the orbiting suns were past their peak and starting their descent across the sky. Patrick once said someday they will collide with each other and merge into one sun, possibly destroying Danselana somehow in the process but that day seems very far away. He felt a jerk on his line and pulled in a long fish with white, fleshy whiskers. It's body was dyed yellow from living in the Piccant and the water's spicy flavor had doubtless flavored it too. With patience he pulled three more fish out of the river, each of them shaped differently.

He packed them in birch bark and started walking back to Wishfern, guided by his compass. The two suns were starting to sink below the horizon now. There was a crunching of leaves, a felmorn maybe. Up he climbed into a nearby tree, being careful not to step on it's eyes and drew his bow. A white horse came into view bearing a rider wearing full armor made of a white metal that covered all of his figure, except his face, the visor was raised. He pulled on the reins and cried, 'Halt!' Then he turned his head behind him and spoke, 'For five-hundred years we have been oppressed, for five-hundred years the forests have suffered, the animals have been destroyed in the thousands, we die by their hands. Today we take our first steps. Today we start restoring Danselana to it's former glory when birds blacked out the sun, the rivers overflowed with fish and Felmorn ate from your hand.' The speaker paused, raised a hand and pointed forward. Rows of elves, wearing white uniform starting marching forward, their footsteps making no noise as they stepped on the leaf covered ground. 'Today we will bring peace to Danselana.'

Chapter one

Amber glanced at her compass, she was riding her horse Tassels through the watching woods towards the Piccant river. Last time she had ridden through here she stopped by Piccant Village, all it's houses were built into a hill on the side of the river and inhabited by men and elves. The village fished the river and farmed produce, but chiefly made a living by exporting animal products, fur, antlers for medicine, metals from their bones and shipping them by water to Melmor, where they were sold. She reached the river, turned right and started riding along the bank. She had intentionally set her compass by her map to the left side of the village so instead of missing the village, hitting the river and not knowing if the village was upstream or downstream, she'd know for certain it was downstream. The river turned to the left ahead and the piers and houses came into view. But something was off, the boats, instead of being docked at the pier, were abandoned on the river's far side. She rode into the village, bodies lay scattered across the ground, vultures had descended among them. She reached with her mind and knocked the vultures away from the bodies. A large amount of armed people must have wanted to sail across the river, they tried to take the villager's boats, and when they refused they killed them. She knelt by the body of a girl who couldn't have been more than eight, she rose the earth nearby, lowered her into the grave and filled in the hole again. She went from body to body, raising the earth near them with her mind, pushing the body in the grave and covering it again. On a pier was the body of an elf. One of his eyes was open, the other had an arrow shaft sticking through it, his chest moved slightly. 'Amber knelt down next to him, took a flask from her satchel and poured some of it into his mouth. She did not try treating the wound, it would be a futile effort. 'Please tell me what happened.' she said. The elf replied in a whisper, 'The Firstborns did this.' Amber had heard rumors of this group while charting the elven lands of the interior, they wanted to remove all the humans from Danselana, returning the continent to how it was before they arrived. 'I am sorry,' Amber said, 'but why did they kill you?' the elf took a deep breath, wincing as he breathed. 'I wouldn't give them my boat.' His eye glanced to the right, Amber looked over the pier's edge and saw the uniformed bodies of two elven soldiers resting on the river's bottom. She must send warning of this new danger, they'd probably march through the small settlements around the blue

mountains, leaving no one alive to tell the tale. When they'd reach Melmor, it would be taken it by surprise and- The elf spoke again, this time fainter than before. 'Are you still there?' 'Yes.' 'The dock over is a floating dock, cut it lose and it will manage as a raft.' 'Thank you,' said Amber, 'Your sacrifice won't be in vain.'

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Every time Hector closed his eyes he saw the aftermath of the massacre, as if the images were scarred in his mind. He had done his best to not think about it. The dead stayed dead and dwelling on it would only keep their memory alive, but the images still tainted his mind and he couldn't forget them. Hector had reached Wishfern after the elves had left, he was too distraught to think what to do next. Amber then arrived and buried the bodies they could find, not in the gravetree but close enough. She had lifted them into the earth with her mind, without touching them, she said the ability had been given to her or something. She was tall, had fair skin and hair, and wore a gray and yellow cloak. She rode a giant of a horse named Tassels who had white shaggy hair dyed with geometric patterns. He was large enough to support both of them easily and, if not the fastest horse, he was very strong and had been carrying both of them without the slightest falter. They had to enter a pass in the blue mountains so they could beat the Firstborns and warn the city of Melmor. His thoughts were interrupted, the ground had become so steep they had to dismount to keep from falling of Tassels. Earth rose up on both sides and they started to pass piles of snow and soon they were walking along a path only a few meters wide with high, icy walls on both sides. The water on Hector's wrist compass froze and the glass shattered. Snow collected on Tassel's hair and Hector's clothes. Hector rummaged in his satchel and pulled out a small quilt from the shelter which he pulled over his shoulders and held in place with one hand, but Amber seemed unaffected by the cold. They passed some frozen corpses of Elves in the middle of the road, Amber lifted them, with her mind, over the ravine's edge and covered them with snow. She spoke, 'Elves are very weak in cold temperatures, this is why the Firstborns didn't use this pass to reach Melmor.' Soon the path came around a corner to a tunnel in the rock, it was several meters high and carved through the dark blue stone of the mountain by some ancient civilization long forgotten. You could see light at it's far end but otherwise it was unlit. Standing like statues on both sides of the entrance were two men covered in snow, I think they were men at least, their shape was confused by the many layers of clothing they wore. The man on the left carried a spear, the right a shortsword. As they approached the man on the right stirred and said, 'The fee for passing through the tunnel is, how about, twenty Drogil equivalence.' A Drogil is one Tropfen of Gold. Amber reached for a satchel beneath her cloak and pulled out five copper coins, the edges were plated with aluminum. Hector's anger blazed, all he knew was gone and now they were being cheated, this was the last reed. 'You're surely not paying these brigands?' said Hector motioning with his free hand, 'This is robbery!' 'It doesn't matter,' said Amber, The bandit had taken unthinkingly tilted his head towards them to hear better over the wind, Amber spoke quieter, 'It's not worth fighting over.' 'But they're stealing from innocent travelers!' 'There's no time to argue, we have to get to Melmor, the bandits will doubtless be dealt with later.' 'But you stopped to bury those corpses back there, why did we stop then?' Amber ignored Hector and stepped forward into the tunnel, handing the coins to the bandit, Hector reluctantly followed.

Hector thought that the tunnel would be warmer and out of the elements, but the moment he stepped in front of it he felt a mighty wind, the sort that takes your breath away, pouring through the tunnel from the other side of the mountains. He hesitated for a few moments in front of the blast, 'What am I doing,' he thought, 'If Wishfern didn't burn I'd be coming back from hunting right now.' Tassels concernedly nudged his back he gathered up his thoughts and started walking. His quilt, though useful while climbing the mountains, was obsolete against the winds. Amber, glancing behind her noticed Hector shivering and with signs, no sound could be heard over the wind, offered him her cloak, Hector declined immediately and regretted his decision only seconds afterwards. He struggled through the tunnel, slowly going slower and slower, until he was crawling. The wind suddenly felt less strong and he opened his eyes, he'd never noticed they were closed. Amber had put her cloak over him. Hector tried to keep walking but he kept stumbling and getting knocked over by the wind, then he fell over and decided he was too tired to get up. Amber lifted him with her mind onto Tassels, and they walked through the wind until coming to a side passage. The end was sealed off with rocks, and there was a crumbling skeleton on the floor next to the ashes of a fire that burned down many years ago. They all just managed to fit in the

passage and Amber got Hector to take a drink of water from a flask she had been carrying in her satchel and knocked some snow of Tassels before moving on. After a few minutes the wind lessened and as they walked it gradually slowed to a stop and all was calm. A short time later it started picking up again, this time flowing the opposite way, from behind their backs. They moved quickly and soon reached the far end.

Unlike the ravine on the other side of the tunnel, this side opened up to the top of a cliff face high up the mountain, below, through the snow blown by the wind, you could see large rolling hills covered by yellow fields, vineyards and fading green orchards, a river wound from the foot of the mountains and several miles downstream it joined the sea. At the river's mouth, surrounded by a long, winding wall, was Melmor, the trading capital of Danselana. Amber guided Tassels, still carrying Hector, down a path on the side of the cliff, in some places the ledge, for it couldn't be called a path in spots, became so narrow that Tassels had to stay pressed up against the rock as not to fall off. After they'd passed the steepest parts of the trail Amber stopped and moved to Hector, who was shivering. 'You have to get off Tassels and walk some.' 'Why?' muttered Hector, 'Because if you don't walk, you will die of the cold.' Hector didn't respond so Amber motioned to Tassels and he knelt down, sliding Hector off. 'Come on,' she said,' Do you see that river?' 'Yes' said Hector, barely glancing over the cliff's edge, 'We have to get there, preferably before sunset, then we can take a boat up the river to Melmor.' With a great deal of effort Hector rose to his feet and started walking. As they walked, the snow along the path became thinner and birds started to chirp in the thickening trees. They came to a meltwater stream that flowed down from the mountains and crossed the path, Amber moved rocks into it as stepping stones so they could pass without getting their feet wet. Soon the path leveled with the ground and ended in a plum orchard.

A tall farmer was standing atop a stepladder pruning the trees, he wore a white shirt, purple-blue pants and a red-purple hood, he had brown hair that hung down to his neck, covering his ears and obscuring his eyes. He turned toward them, 'Hello, I don't often have visitors here, where are you going?' the tone of his voice stayed level as he spoke, 'to Melmor,' said Hector. The farmer moved his mouth but said no words, the grass around their feet grew high, grabbing at their feet, holding them in place. He raised his hand and an attrin materialized in it. An attrin is a weapon consisting of a wooden barrel and a handle, a flint chain runs through the barrel, powered by a mainspring beforehand. As the chain spins through the barrel, the flint scrapes against a metal scratch plate, shooting sparks for cerium, frost for titanium, waves of sound for copper, etcetera. This attrin was equipped with a gold scratch plate so it emitted lightning. The barrel of the attrin was large enough we can safely assume the mainspring was large and could shoot a bolt strong enough to kill a horse, no several horses. He aimed the attrin at Hector and Amber, then pulled the release. At the same time Amber pushed the attrin with her mind, pivoting it upward into the farmer's face. Lightning poured from the attrin, destroying his hood, hair, scarring his skin, blinding him and wounding him mortally. Amber wrenched the attrin from his grip and threw it onto the grass, where it lay in a corner still sparking. The farmer spoke, 'Decades of secrecy only to fail at the last moment, the advantage is lost, but the war goes on.' Tall pointed ears could be seen on his head now that his hair and hat were disintegrated. Then he died. 'He was a firstborn,' Said Amber 'he must have been undercover here for decades just in case someone tried going through the tunnel to warn Melmor like we did.'

Amber and Hector rode through the orchard until they came to a fence dividing the plum orchard from a field of sharble gourds, they got off Tassels, climbed over the fence and remounted. They rode along the fence to a path winding through the field, there they turned and rode. The path wasn't straight, it wound in and out of the tall, white and purple marbled gourds until they came out at the far end of the field, on the river. A barge lay at anchor, tied to a tree on the bank, workers were loading fully ripened white sharble gourds and some smaller produce such as cucumbers grown between the gourds onto it. A man wearing a ginormous reed hat and baggy clothes stood in front of the barge's gangplank, watching the workers. He sometimes stopped one of them, confiscated a cucumber for quality control and ate it. When he saw Amber and Hector walking through his field he waved at them, swallowed his food, took a deep breath and said, 'Hello neighbors! Since you cut through my field I can only presume you came over the blue mountains and want to go to Melmor, and if I'm right in presuming that you took the pass you must be in a hurry or you'd have gone around, and the best way to get to Melmor in a hurry is by the river. And here am I, with a boat, ready to sail, by river, to Melmor. So why don't you come with me?' He exhaled loudly and took a large bite out a cucumber, he had one in both hands and

was taking turns biting them. ‘Everything you’ve presumed couldn’t be closer to the truth.’ Said Amber ‘Hop aboard then!, my name’s Paxus’ He yelled to the workers, ‘Don’t bring those last two crates on the barge! They’re not perfect quality!’ ‘Where should we put it then?’ Asked a worker ‘Take it away, I couldn’t ever sell such miserable looking fruit.’ The workers smiled and set the crates aside. Amber explained the nature of their journey, to warn of the Firstborns, and the workers said they’d take ‘precautions’. Amber and Hector told Paxus their names, then they stepped onto the barge, Amber leading Tassels, a worker untied the rope and they were off.

As the barge was pulled down the river by the current, Hector noticed a pen at the back of the ship inside was a large Gern, ‘What is the Gern for?’ he asked. ‘He’s to tow the barge back up the river, he will walk on the bank and pulls it back upstream with a rope.’ The ride to the river would, in normal circumstances, been lovely. They sailed through all sorts of farms and gardens but weren’t relaxed enough to appreciate it. Hector sat on a large empty crate, topped with a cushion and watched the scenery go by, half listening to Amber talking with Paxus, who was at the helm, about the latest developments in Flintcasting. The sun had set by now. Hector started drifting off and closed his eyes, before him was Wishfern right after the massacre. His eyes shot open, he wouldn’t, couldn’t think of all he’d lost again, he couldn't open that wound. But then he had a thought, what if some escaped the massacre? He had already accepted that everyone was gone, if he checked he’d be thrown into uncertainty, wondering if the survivors were still alive, but if he didn’t check he’d have even less certainty, no proof he was the only survivor. He sighed, closed his eyes again and wandered among the dream, counting the fallen. There was at least thirty Wishfernians, but there was only twenty bodies. He tried looking at the faces of the bodies to deduct who had survived but they he could not see the detail, it was as if everything had been patterned in colored tiles that looked perfect from a distance but when you looked closer, it was impossible to see the details. Still, some had survived. Maybe they just missed their bodies, a third of the population? Nonsense, maybe the elves had disintegrated them som- Nonsense, now I’m just making excuses to not look for them. He felt something push him, his eyes flew open, it was Paxus. ‘Sorry, only meant to shake you awake, not knock you off the crate, anyways we’re at Melmor.

It was morning. The barge was docked in a busy port, surrounding him was all manner of shops, stalls and businesses, some of the nearby boats had stores on them. They were selling wood, iron, food and most important of all, flint. All harvested from Danselana in plenty. The air smelled like brine and was filled with the sound of merchants calling out their wares. Paxus pulled some paper and pen from his pocket and drew a hexagon on it, then he drew a line going through the center of the hexagon and a circle in the middle of the line. On the top left corner of the hexagon, he drew a smaller hexagon. ‘This is a map of Melmor, we are in this port here,’ he pointed to the innermost circle on the map, ‘Amber has gone ahead to see the king in the keep here,’ he pointed to the small hexagon. She wants us to catch up and for you to back up her story about the Firstborns to convince the court there is real danger.’ ‘Why are you coming?’ ‘I have my reasons, besides, you’d get easily lost among the streets if you didn’t know the exact way.’

Chapter 2

‘But m’lord,’ spoke Architect Reznik, ‘if there is an approaching army of elves, would you put your life in the hands of one?’ ‘We’ve already discussed this,’ replied King Lukis sharply, ‘we don’t have time to question loyalty or the reality of the situation, we have to act.’ ‘I am saddened by your lack of trust Architect,’ said Commander Aadil, ‘I have served the King’s line for decades, since I was a boy, and would never betray him. I am also bound by oath.’ ‘What is a decade for one who does not die?’ said Reznik, ‘and if these elves march, as you say,’ he gestured to Amber, ‘for the desolation of mankind, what worth is an oath to one you think is worthless.’ ‘Reznik!’ yelled King Lukis, ‘I will tolerate this no longer! You and Aadil are to go to ready your forces, Reznik our defenses must be airtight, you will go and attend to your walls! Aadil, please go ready your forces and burn the fields adjacent to Melmor, we will be ready for any threat! There was a knock at the door to the meeting room, Amber went and opened the door. A servant was there, ‘A boy and a glutton wish to see you m’lord, I told them you were in a meeting but they said they knew, and told me what it was about. Would you like to see them m’lord?’ ‘He is the witness from Wishfern I told you about King Lukis.’ Said Amber. ‘He has permission to enter,’ said Lukis, ‘Aadil and Reznik, please be about your business.’ The two left the room, they went through the doorway

shoulder to shoulder, neither ahead of the other. Then Paxus entered the room, followed by Hector, he bowed slightly and Hector followed his example. ‘Where are you from?’ asked the King. ‘Wishfern, it was north of the blue mountains.’ answered Hector. ‘Please tell me how you came to Melmor.’ Hector told the king how the Firstborns had passed him as he hid in a tree and overheard their leader’s speech, how when he returned to Wishfern it was in ruins, half the people dead, the others missing, how Amber had buried the bodies and their passage through the tunnel, the encounter with the Firstborn farmer and then their journey to Melmor on Paxus’s barge.

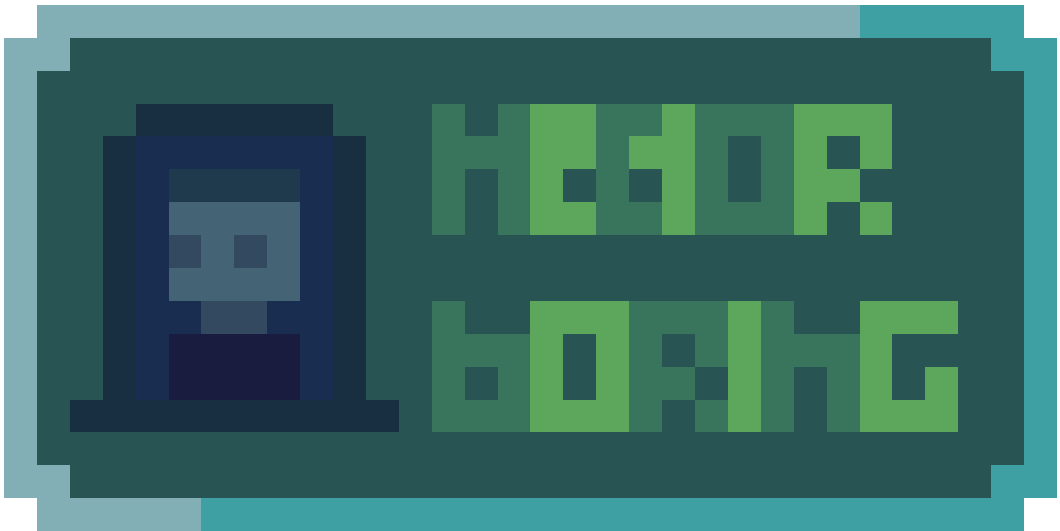
Run finis.

Why have I ended this run?

The biggest issue is Hector, he’s useless, the guy is just along for the ride. Every outline of the following pages involved lots of Aadil and Reznik but Hector? He’s just there, the book still followed him but the only thing he does is correctly recognize that the Firstborn Aadil assassinates isn’t the leader which doesn’t have any lasting impact on the story anyway. I could have kept going and hammered out a tolerable story, but it certainly wouldn’t be publishable. Some of the other problems include the Firstborns being *way* to strong and they killed more people than I wanted them to.

What have I learned?

When you make a main character make him/her different, make them interesting to watch, they should *want* to be here, not be forced to go along for the ride.

What do I like?

I like the bit where Amber talks to the dying elf on the dock. The tunnel, Melmor, Wishfern and the Piccant are cool locations I will return to in later runs. I designed a magic system for this run I will reuse in future runs.